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**Who Knew Hemorrhoids Could Be Profound?  
A Reflection on LGBTQ Healthcare  
at the U.S.-Mexican Border**

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For three years, I have worked as a physician with the Refugee Health Alliance, a non-governmental organization that provides healthcare to patients seeking asylum at the U.S.-Mexican border. The clinic serves women, children, families, and a considerable number of LGBTQ individuals. One such patient was Miss Lady, a transgendered woman from Cuba. In order to escape daily physical and sexual abuse in her own country, she had flown from Cuba to Guatemala, and then taken a series of buses to cross the border into Mexico, at which point she travelled north toward the U.S. border. All in all, the journey had taken her 14 months.

She was 5 feet and 2 inches tall, wore a padded bra over her broad flat chest, and always had brilliantly colored nail polish. She had terrible teeth from years without access to dental care, but the sweetest smile nonetheless. I wanted to ask more about her journey to Mexico which, like those of so many other refugees, had been harrowing.

She was not to be distracted, however. She looked at me desperately across the exam table.

“I’m very concerned about my problem,” she said. “When I have intercourse, my partners think I have an infection, and I can’t convince them otherwise.”

I did a quick exam and it was immediately clear that she had external hemorrhoids. I was happy to reassure her that hemorrhoids are benign, albeit annoying. She said she knew that—another doctor had already told her as much. He had also told her there was a surgery she could undergo to have them removed. “Please help me,” she pleaded. “I need them gone.”

I hesitated. Conducting such a procedure in this setting was somewhat unorthodox, as well as a little risky. Our clinic consists of three exam rooms, none of which were the most sterile of environments. What if she got an infection? What about pain control? She would probably be quite tender for a week or two after the procedure. Moreover, I was a family medicine doctor, and while I removed skin tags all the time, I wasn’t a surgeon. The anus is very vascular. What if she bled a lot? Would she be able to recover from the operation while living in a shelter for transgendered individuals? Would her new home be sanitary enough to keep her wound clean?

In medicine, we carefully consider the risks and benefits of each thing we do to a patient’s body. If I decided to proceed, I could cause her significant bleeding and pain. I could also leave her cosmetically worse off if I ended up with redundant scar tissue. Was this really the right thing to do?

“Doctora, listen,” she said. “I came all the way from Cuba. I have been beat up, abused, and

raped more times than I can count. Now this. Now I can't even be with a partner without them thinking I have some kind of disease. I want to feel comfortable when I am naked. I want to feel comfortable in my own skin."

Who would have thought that hemorrhoids could be such a profound problem? For me, as a doctor, they were simply an annoyance. For her, they represented much more. Having already endured a lifetime in the wrong body, she experienced this as just another thing that was "wrong" about her physical form, another aspect of her being that brought her shame instead of comfort. I couldn't give her the gender reaffirming surgery that she certainly wanted and deserved, but I could fix this one small thing for her.

In spite of my hesitancy, we decided to do it. The room was incredibly hot. Sweat dripped down my face. I asked her to lie down on the table. I anesthetized around her anus, then used clamps to cut off as much blood supply as possible to the tissue. Then, extremely carefully and holding my breath, I began to cut away the redundant tissue. I went slowly, taking care to ask her every few minutes if she was having any pain or discomfort. I wanted to make sure this experience would be as respectful to her as possible. After a lifetime of trauma, she deserved that much.

The procedure itself went smoothly. Miss Lady returned a few days later for a wound check and was pleased with how she was healing. "I feel so much more confident now with my partner. I know it's a small change, but to me it

makes all the difference in how confident I feel about my body.”

As humans, we cannot disconnect our physical form from our mental health. One informs the other. This much I have learned from her story. “Who knew a butthole could represent so much?” I asked her, maybe a bit unprofessionally.

In spite of ourselves, we giggled.

### **About the Author**

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